

The Symbolism of the Diamond in Light of some Early Christian Emblems

By Gauthier Pierozak

Introduction

The diamond, the hardest and brightest gem in the mineral world, is a pure carbon crystal that retains its polish despite all friction. Mainly known for its clarity and brilliance, qualities that will participate in its divine symbolism as we will see later, diamonds can also be found in several colors, and some are even black. But it is because of its hardness, unique among the gems, that the ancient Greeks called the diamond ἀδάμας (*adamas*), a word derived from δαμάω (*damao* - to subdue). The ancient jewelers thus qualified the diamond as *indomitable* and *invincible* because they did not know how to cut it. The Romans also retained the expression, although their artists had discovered the property of the diamond not only to cut into the hardest stones, but also to cut itself.

Due to their atomic structure, diamonds have very high thermal conductivity, which makes them appear cool to the touch. The ancient commentators deduced that the diamond was resistant to fire, which placed it on the same level as the salamander in legendary tales.

The geological origin of the diamond lives up to its name and its legend: most natural diamonds are indeed formed under conditions of very high temperatures and pressures, at great depths in the earth's mantle. Their generation under these extreme conditions takes up to several billion years for the atoms of carbon to organize themselves into diamonds. The diamonds are then brought to the surface through the magma of volcanic eruptions which, when cooled, forms a rock containing diamonds.

Until the 16th century, India and the island of Borneo in the Far East were the only diamond production regions, and it is also in India that the most famous ancient diamonds were extracted, such as the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, now part of the English crown. When the deposits of Brazil were later discovered, they supplied the Western market until the end of the 19th century, date of the discovery of the South African deposits. Since that time, most diamonds have come from Africa, and this situation has been the origin of several wars, particularly in Sierra Leone, in order to control the main deposits existing on this continent. However, the old bestiaries of course only relate the eastern origin of diamonds, as we will now see.

At the beginning of the Christian era, Pliny recapitulated in his *Natural History* what his peers believed to know about the gem-diamond 'adamas':

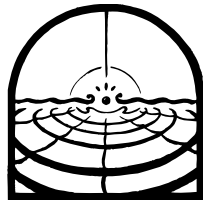
'The most highly valued of human possessions, let alone gemstones, is the 'adamas,' a which for long was known only to kings, and to very few of them. 'Adamas' was the name given to the 'knot of gold' found very occasionally in mines in association with gold and, so it seemed, formed only in gold.... [Adamas] are tested upon an anvil, and they are so recalcitrant to blows that an iron hammer head may split in two and even the anvil itself be unseated. Indeed, the hardness of 'adamas' is indescribable, and so too that property whereby it conquers fire and never becomes heated. Hence it derives its name, because, according to the meaning of the term in Greek, it is the 'unconquerable force.' [...] For this 'unconquerable force' that defies Nature's two most powerful substances, iron and fire, can be broken up by goat's blood. But it must be steeped in blood that is fresh and still warm, and even so needs many hammer blows. Even then, it may break all but the best anvils and iron hammers.

The 'adamas' has so strong an aversion to the magnet that when it is placed close to the iron it prevents the iron from being attracted away from itself. [...] 'Adamas' prevails also over poisons and renders them powerless, dispels attacks of wild distraction and drives groundless fears from the mind.¹

It will be noted, and this is important for what follows, that no mention is made of the luminous quality of the diamond nor of its purity.

¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, book XXXVII.

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